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SUBJECT: POTENTIAL PAKISTANI PRESIDENTS

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Classified By: Anne W. Patterson, for reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

11. (C) Summary: Following Musharraf's resignation August 18, Pakistan's political party leaders began immediate debates over who would become the next president; they have now taken a 72 hour break. On August 20, the Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM) made a surprise announcement that it would support Asif Zardari for president. This alone would not clinch Zardari's candidacy, but it does move him one step closer to being able to govern without Nawaz Sharif should the coalition break apart. This cable outlines the top potential nominees for president. End Summary.

12. (C) With the August 18 resignation of Pervez Musharraf, speculation is rampant about who will replace him as president. Under Pakistan's constitution, a new president must be indirectly elected within 30 days by an electoral college comprised of the Senate, National Assembly and the four provincial assemblies (see septel for process details). Both the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) met late August 18 to begin deliberations. The two parties have now taken a 72 hour break amid reports of significant acrimony during talks that, again, centered on restoration of the deposed judiciary. Pakistan Muslim League (PML) rank and file met August 20 with Musharraf; they may put their own candidate forward.

13. (C) PPP leader Asif Zardari has made it clear to us that he wants to be president, but PML-N has made it equally clear they will not accept him. Given Zardari's history of corruption, we believe the Army may have some concerns about a Zardari candidacy as well. The surprise announcement August 20 that MQM will support, even nominate, Zardari will help but certainly not clinch his chances. If Zardari does not succeed, he will still push for a PPP candidate. We do not believe that PML-N leader Nawaz Sharif wants to be president (in the hope he can again be Prime Minister). In an effort to outmaneuver Zardari, PML-N is pushing for someone who is a politically neutral "elder statesman" and/or someone from the "lesser" provinces of Sindh or Balochistan.

Presidential Powers

14. (C) Under constitutional reforms adopted by Musharraf, the President has significant powers to dissolve the National Assembly and appoint provincial governors and military service chiefs. The President, acting through the governor of the Northwest Frontier Province, also controls the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. The PPP-led coalition government has drafted a constitutional reform package that would shift the President's powers to dissolve the Assembly and appoint governors and military services chiefs back to the Prime Minister. That package, which would require

two-thirds approval in both the National Assembly and the Senate, has not yet been introduced in the parliament.

15. (C) In 2004, Musharraf created a 13-member National Security Council, coordinated by a National Security Advisor he appointed (Tariq Aziz just resigned from the position). The PPP and the PML-N have long been critical of the National Security Council, which they view as another tool to enhance presidential power at the expense of parliament and the Prime Minister. After the 2008 election, Zardari created a new position, National Security Advisor to the Prime Minister (now held by Mahmood Durrani) as a counter to the National Security Council. It is not clear if the PPP will dissolve the National Security Council, appoint their own National Security Advisor to the new President, or merge the two positions.

16. (C) In a change Musharraf pushed through during the November 2007 state of emergency, the President also leads the National Command Authority, a civilian-military body that controls Pakistan's nuclear weapons. The President also appoints the Attorney General; Musharraf appointed Malik Qayyum, who resigned on August 18. PPP Senator Latif Khosa is widely believed to be the Attorney General-designate.

Potential Candidates

17. (C) In addition to Zardari, the following individuals (in no particular order) are considered serious contenders to become the next President of Pakistan:

--General (ret) Jehangir Karamat. Karamat would likely be well-received by the Pakistani military. He was Pakistan's Ambassador to the U.S. from 2004 to 2006. Prior to that appointment, he served as the Chief of Army Staff (COAS) from December 1995 to October 1998, when he was forced by Nawaz Sharif to resign. His stints at Stanford University and Brookings Institution after retirement highlight his interest in research and academics. He is approximately 68 years of age.

--Sardar Attaullah Mengal. Aged 78, Mengal is a long shot for the job but one who would give often-neglected Balochistan a boost and perhaps could help quell a simmering secessionist movement there. He is the chief of the powerful Mengal tribe who served as the Chief Minister of Balochistan in from 1972 to 1973. He has spent eight years intermittently in jail and has not played an active role in politics since his release from jail in 1977. He went abroad from 1977-1992.

--Dr. Fehmida Mirza. Appointment of a woman would fit well with the PPP's image and make Pakistan the first Muslim nation to elect a female head of state. Religious leaders likely would oppose this appointment as the head of state traditionally also is responsible for leading the nation in Muslim prayers. Mirza, 52, is serving as the first female Speaker of the National Assembly of Pakistan. Currently in her third term, the long-time PPP loyalist first won election in 1997. Mirza earned a degree in medicine in 1982. Her husband, Dr. Zulfiqar Ali Mirza, maintains close (some say financially beneficial) ties to Zardari.

--Faryal Talpur. Asif Zardari's sister, she was elected in the June by-elections to fill Benazir's Sindh seat in the National Assembly. Mrs. Talpur previously served as district Nazim (mayor) of her native Nawabshah.

--Asfundyar Wali Khan. Perhaps the most interesting choice, Wali Khan would be a compromise candidate from the coalition as he represents neither the PPP nor the PML-N. Wali Khan, aged 59, leads the Awami National Party (ANP), a Pashtun nationalist party. The ANP is part of the ruling coalition at the national level and leads the Northwest Frontier Province's provincial government along with the PPP. A secular political party, ANP defeated the religious parties in the 2008 election. It lost the election in 2002 based, in

part, on Wali Khan's refusal to condemn American intervention in Afghanistan.

--Aftab Shaaban Mirani. A PPP loyalist and close friend of Zardari's, Mirani served as Benazir Bhutto's Minister of Defense in her second term and as Sindh Chief Minister in her first term. He was widely expected to be named PPP Minister of Defense in 2008 and could still replace current MOD Ahmed Mukhtar (who currently holds both the Defense and Commerce portfolios).

--Fakhruddin G. Ibrahim. PML-N is supporting his candidacy, probably to heighten attention to the PML-N theme of supporting an independent judiciary. Ibrahim has played a number of legal, judicial, and political roles throughout his career. Currently 80 years old, he served as the Federal Law Minister in a caretaker government in 1996, the governor of Sindh, a Supreme Court judge and an Attorney General. When former President General Zia al-Haq came to power, Ibrahim refused to take a new oath under a provisional constitution order and resigned.

--Saed Zaman Siddiqi. PML-N is supporting his candidacy, probably for the same reasons they support Ibrahim. A well-known and respected lawyer and jurist, Siddiqi is 71 years old. As Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, he opted to step down in 1999 rather than take a new oath under Musharraf. Siddiqi first served as a jurist in the Sindh High Court in 1980 before becoming the Sindh Chief Justice in 1990. He received his appointment to the Supreme Court in 1992.

18. (C) Comment: Zardari has been wooing MQM leader Altaf Hussain for months in the hopes of obtaining MQM support in the National Assembly and strengthening his hand with Nawaz. MQM's declaration of support would put Zardari one step closer to being able to govern without Nawaz Sharif should PML-N quit the coalition. With MQM, the Awami National Party and Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, Zardari will have 171 of 342 seats; to obtain a majority, he would need support from either tribal area independents (12) or Musharraf's party (54). Behind the scenes, the PPP is in negotiations with both groups. End comment.

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